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AUTHOR Brooks, Barbara J.
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ABSTRACT

There was a time in the Americas when many different languages were spoken by the diverse native peoples. This situation changed rapidly as waves of Europeans arrived, containing and controlling the native peoples, often forcing them to forfeit language and culture. Today remnants of some Native American tribes are striving to find ways to maintain or renew their own languages This paper explores some of the issues involved, and then focuses on efforts to maintain and renew Oklahoma Cherokee. (Author)

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LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND LANGUAGE RENEWAL
Among Cherokee People in Oklahoma

Barbara J. Brooks

Abstract: There was a time in the Americas when many very different languages were spoken by the diverse native peoples. This situation changed rapidly as waves of colonizing Europeans arrived, containing and controlling the native peoples, often forcing them to forfeit culture and language. Today remnants of some Indian tribes are striving to find ways to maintain or renew their own languages. This paper explores some of the issues involved, and then focuses on efforts to maintain and renew Oklahoma Cherokee.

Historical Overview

Before contact with usurping Europeans, the native peoples of the Americas spoke thousands of separate languages (Driver 1961:555). In 500 years the native languages of North America alone have been reduced to fewer than 200, with one or more additional languages being lost each year (Leap 1982:20). Furthermore, Krauss estimates that 80% of the remaining languages are already 'moribund', that is, not being acquired by children (Hale 1992:4). At the present time, however, there are also strong movements afoot within certain American Indian groups in North America to maintain or to renew their own language as a viable part of community life. This paper will provide a brief overview of the historical basis for the present situation, and then take a more in-depth look at the options and choices regarding language maintenance now facing the Cherokee Indians of Oklahoma.

The history of United States-Indian dealings is that of a cycle of making and breaking treaties on the part of the U.S. government and the forced removal of Indian groups across the continent. Some people, such as the Winnebagos, were forced to move six different times as white settlers encroached on their lands (Banks 1979:152). The following excerpt from a Cherokee newspaper hypothesized how the whites might set about taking Indian land in Texas:

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> ... a commissioner will be sent down to negotiate, with a pocket full of money and his mouth full of lies. Some chiefs he will bribe, some he will flatter and some he will make drunk; and the result will be ... something that will be called a treaty (Hagan 1961:99).

Not content to take Indian lands, the newcomers also set about systematically to undermine Indian social structure, seizing upon language as a central means for 'civilizing' these peoples whose ways were different from their own (Banks 1979:156). Thus:

> the Nez Percé did not lose their language by accident, but rather by design, through the policy of the federal government and various religious and missionary groups. The outside groups determined that the Indian tribes would learn English as a replacement for their own ancestral languages. But the process did not stop there. Tribes were also expected to supplant one religion with another, one culture with another, and one mode of subsistence with another ... (St. Clair and Leap 1982:xi).

Justification for the attempts to eliminate Indian languages were spelled out in the 1868 report of the so-called Peace Commissioners, who concluded that Indian peoples' 'barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted' (Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs (CIA) 1868:43-4).

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) soon followed the CIA reports by making this same policy explicit in its schools. Upon learning that both Dakota and English were being used for instruction, the Bureau directed:

> You will please inform the authorities of this school that the English language only must be taught the Indian youth placed there for educational and industrial training at the expense of the government. If Dakota or any other language is taught such children, they will be taken away and their support by the government will be withdrawn from the school (Report of CIA 1887:xxi).

Specific measures taken against individual students who used their native language at school included

beatings and having their mouths washed out with the harsh lye soap then in use (Metcalf 1979:15). Even a little seven-year-old girl, away from home for the first time and speaking only Cherokee, was caned every time she uttered any sound that was not English, a language she had never heard and could not speak (M.A. Wickliffe, personal communication). Various punishments for speaking an Indian language at school continued well into the 1950's.[1]

According to Walker (1981:170-171), there were at least three widely held assumptions behind the crusade against native languages. These included a belief on the part of English-speaking educators that English was better than any other language, and certainly better than any Indian language, and perhaps 'the only language appropriate for rational discourse.' In addition, there was the assumption that '<u>all</u> Americans should speak, read, and write English,' in spite of the fact that 'no generation of Americans has as yet conformed to this ideal.' A third assumption was that 'one must assiduously divest oneself of competence in any language other than English' in order to become fully fluent in English. These 'demonstrably false' assumptions are still popular among English-speaking educators who remain 'reluctant to permit the use of native languages in their classrooms.'

Furthermore, blatant racial prejudice is evident in comments such as this one, from an article entitled 'Education for Indians': 'They are, as a race, distinctly inferior to white men in intellectual vitality and capability' (Harrison 1887:321). Attitudes such as this were also manifested in official policy statements:

> If (the Indian) can read and write English understandingly, and understands the first four rules in arithmetic, he is sufficiently educated for all practical purposes for generations to come (Report of CIA 1884:67).

On the other hand, many Indian leaders tried to point out that poor academic attainment was due in large part to incompetent instructional personnel and not to any shortcomings of Indian children. These leaders appealed to Washington to more adequately fulfill its side of the signed treaties. One superintendent of Indian Affairs duly reported that:

> The chiefs whom I met in council complained that the employees heretofore sent to instruct them under the provisions of the treaty had

> taken their women to live with, and had done little else; and they seemed desirous to know if that was the method proposed by the government to carry out the stipulations of the treaty (Report of CIA 1862:303).

In addition to overt attempts to eradicate Indian languages, there were other factors hastening their demise. The countless government-backed efforts to eliminate or at least reduce Indian populations through armed conflict, germ warfare, forced removals and other disruptive activities resulted in the complete disappearance of countless tribes, their languages along with them. Even more recently, the government imposed a series of relocation programs designed to entice young Indian people by the thousands to leave their homes, come to resettlement cities in pursuit of frequently elusive jobs and thus effectively break up cultural continuity within the family structure back home. In addition, the relocated Indians often found themselves linguistically isolated as well, and use of their native language had to be abandoned in the new environment (Leap 1981:134-6).

Overall societal prejudice has also been a factor. Until recently, Indian languages were looked down upon by the majority white population. Young children were often made to feel that 'in order to gain an adequate command of English, the Indian student is ... forced by a culturally alien educational system to deny a basic part of himself' (CAL 1975:3). All too often, even those academics who specialize in languages and linguistics have failed to exert their professional efforts and sufficiently address their attention to Indian languages before they perished (Hale 1992:6-10). Thus, Chaika once reported that:

> ... so unimportant have American Indians been to their usurpers that Ohanessian in 1972 could complain that we did not know how many Indians of any type were monolingual Indian speakers, how many were bilingual, what sorts of English were spoken by different Indian groups, how many did not speak tribal languages at all, in what social settings Indian languages were used and in what settings English was used, what sorts of differences there were between the generations in language use, or what attitudes the Indians had towards English and towards their tribal languages (1982:240).

The pressures against Indian language maintenance were compounded by Indian parents themselves. Oftentimes, a parent who vividly remembered being beaten for 'speaking Indian' in school elected to raise the next generation to speak only English, hoping to spare them the same tortures and societal handicaps in the future (M.A. Wickliffe, p.c.). Against such a backdrop of difficulties, it is little wonder that many Indian languages failed to survive.

The fact that any Indian languages have persisted at all is an attestation to the cultural cohesion and strength of Indian peoples. Walker (1981a:170) cogently makes an interesting comparison of the literacy levels of those for whom English is the native language and those for whom it is not:

> We are told that a very large minority of American high school graduates who speak English as a native language are 'functionally illiterate.' That is to say that millions of native speakers of English in the United States are unable to read their own language adequately despite twelve years of instruction in literacy skills and growing up under constant bombardment of printed English ... This being the case, it is remarkable indeed that Americans whose first language is not English and who have received no support whatever from the American educational system have nonetheless contrived somehow to preserve their own traditions of literacy. In the case of some American Indian societies this feat has been accomplished by people who, for several generations, were forbidden to use their native language at all in Federal Indian Schools.

This 'remarkable' accomplishment is due in large part to the fact that language is viewed by many Indian peoples as critical to maintaining cultural identity and continuity (Medicine 1982:3).

Today, Indian people are more and more expressing their concern and beginning to seek ways to keep their native language viable or to renew it if it has fallen into relative disuse. Indeed, in some cases,

> Ironically, the very parents who neglected to teach their children Lakota are now the ones who are most concerned about having the

> language taught at school, since they realize that the disappearance of their ancestral tongue will mean the loss of group identity (Schach 1980:178).

Cherokee

Cherokee people in Oklahoma take great interest in their native language, whether or not they themselves still use it. Indeed, Cherokee continues to be the home language for thousands, and some would assert that a person must be able to speak Cherokee in order to be Cherokee.[2]

There is also a long and justly proud history of literacy in Cherokee which continues even today in many Cherokee churches and in the practice of traditional Cherokee doctors. Beginning with Sequoyah, a monolingual Cherokee who invented a syllabary for his people in 1821, Cherokee people established a tradition of literacy far surpassing their new white neighbors'. In the 1830's Cherokees were estimated to be 90% literate, using Cherokee for everything from personal letters and accounts to newspapers and books (Walker 1969:151).

This achievement was one of many which led Mooney (1975:xi) to comment that 'unlike most Indians, Cherokees are not conservative.' By this he meant that Cherokee people did not cling to the old ways, but rather 'that the Cherokee, more easily than other tribes, made the transition from ancient tradition to methods, tools, and ways that they recognized as superior and useful.' (Bettis 1975:xi). Thus the invention of literacy in Cherokee was quickly embraced and put into practice. Willingness to learn and adapt also enabled them to adjust and survive as their land and livelihood were whittled away by treaties.

Eventually, gold was discovered on what was left of the ancestral land. The U.S. government confiscated the Cherokee printing press and marched the Cherokee people along the infamous 'Trail of Tears' during the winter of 1838-39, leaving one quarter of the Cherokee Nation dead along the way. Nevertheless, upon arrival in Indian Territory, the people reorganized and soon set up a new printing press. Knowledge has long been considered the hallmark of a mature and responsible member of Cherokee society, and 'Cherokees associate literacy with knowledge' (Walker 1981a:180). In accordance, the Cherokees established an outstanding school system in Tahlequah, Indian Territory, kept up at the expense of the Cherokee Nation, for all citizens (Walker 1981a:150).

This system included high schools for both women and men, as well as primary, mission and orphan schools for Indian, black and white children (Mooney 1975:157). Most Cherokees were literate in both Cherokee and English at this time, and both were used in the schools. Indeed, 'the Western Cherokee had a higher English literacy level than the neighboring white populations of either Texas or Arkansas' (Walker 1969:151). Far from emulating the Cherokees' success, the United States dismantled their schools, confiscated the Cherokee press once again, and officially dissolved the Cherokee Nation, incorporating it into the state of Oklahoma in 1907 (Walker 1981:147-50).

Since that time, literacy in both Cherokee and English has dropped, although spoken Cherokee is still quite important. Leap (1981:134) quotes one Cherokee educator who explained how important a viable Indian language tradition is:

> For most Indian tribes, the most symbolic thing to them is their language. The Cherokee talk their language and by this they are able to define the tribe ... There was a time when we lost most of our people over sixty. If we did not have our rituals written down, we would not have them today. Young people in urban areas do not know to speak their native language and I think it is critical that they learn. If they don't, they will be in a bind because you cannot be an Indian and go home and not know how to speak your language.

Certain segments of Cherokee society continue to promote Cherokee language and literacy. Both of these are closely tied to cultural identity and to language attitudes and issues. It would seem that, as long as Cherokee and English each serve viable separate functions for Cherokee people, bilingualism will be the norm in their part of the world.

Contemporary Issues

The following excerpt from The Written Languages of the World concerning Cherokee helps to establish a backdrop for the discussion of issues that follows:

> No other Indian ethnic group has made so decided an effort to modernize their political and cultural life in order to adapt themselves to new conditions created by the white man and thus to make possible peaceful collaboration, without surrendering their inalienable rights

> to a community identity ... At the same time, language maintenance for so small a group is becoming more difficult in a time of increasing interaction between all segments of the country's society (Kloss and McConnell 1978:534).

Some of the language issues now facing Cherokees are similar to those facing other groups; some are more specific to their own situation in Oklahoma. The general issues include whether the language should be maintained or not; whether renewal programs should be devised for those who have not learned the language; what method or methods of maintenance should be employed; what vehicle should be used, i.e. school instruction, or community activities, or home-based activities; what mode should be employed, i.e. should the program be designed to preserve oral or written Cherokee, or one at the expense of the other; whose responsibility is it to maintain the language, to conduct a program, and to pay for it; what group or groups should be served by the program; who should prepare materials; what qualifications should teachers have; what measures should be used so that the people know when a program is doing whatever it is supposed to be doing, and so on.

Of particular interest to some Cherokees is the question of whether the Cherokee language needs maintenance or not, and what should be done by whom in either case. Cherokee was considered to be extinct for all practical purposes earlier in this century, at least as far as outsiders were concerned. Even the Kilpatricks in Oklahoma thought that 'Sequoyah's syllabary and the whooping crane stand in approximately the same relationship to oblivion ... The spoken language itself faces extinction' (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick 1965:viii). Yet a thorough look back into the hill country communities reveals that the Cherokee-speaking population continues to increase and is now estimated at well over 11,000 in Oklahoma alone (D.H. King, p.c.).

Equally interesting are the differing internal attitudes about the language. The official tribal Council is proud of past accomplishments, but until recently adopted a laissez faire attitude towards the fate of the language, as if Cherokee were nice but not really necessary in modern life. At the other end of the spectrum is an organized group of conservatives who have consistently held that Cherokee must be protected and promoted as part of the cultural identity of the people. Individual opinions range from the parent who wishes to see the language maintained but does not wish to see her children and grandchildren held back academically or socially because they may speak Cherokee, to those who

feel that it is only by keeping the language alive that they will be able to keep from losing positive basic group values not evident in dominant society (R. Allen, p.c.). Then there are some who actively promote language renewal designed to insure that there will be expert speakers who will encourage others to keep learning the language (Otto 1982:32-3).

Likewise, people disagree as to which vehicle should be used to maintain the language. The Cherokee syllabary has traditionally been taught in some Cherokee speaking churches and is used by Cherokee doctors as well. Then there are the monolingual Cherokee grandparents whose grandchildren still learn from them. Many people feel that this is sufficient, especially those who feel that people will manage to become bilingual as the need arises in their environment (J. Gonzales, p.c.).

Many others feel that schools are the best vehicles both for maintaining Cherokee and for assisting monolingual Cherokee children to become bilingual in Cherokee and English. At the same time there are Cherokees who, like so many other Indians, see white-controlled schools as a threat to Indian culture, since they so often separated young people from their culture either physically or socially, or both. On the other hand, there are some who actually have fond memories of years spent at the old boarding schools, despite the hardships, because in some cases they inadvertently helped to perpetuate a sense of Indian identity albeit with English as the lingua franca (McBeth 1984:4-12).

Two other serious concerns about entrusting language maintenance to the schools involve the dearth of qualified and motivated personnel who are competent in both Cherokee and teaching skills, and the very real problem of continuity.[3] There have been many cutbacks in public school programs lately, and there can be no guarantee of future government support for language maintenance or bilingual education programs, although the Native American Languages Act may well help change that situation.[4] It can be quite disheartening to set up a program that raises expectations and hopes, only to have it dismantled before any benefit to the children accrues. Indians have had quite enough of unfulfilled promises.

More unanimity of agreement can be found regarding which mode of language, oral or written, than on any other issue. Cherokee people are justifiably proud of their history of literacy and usually expect both spoken and written Cherokee to be made available. There is none of the aversion to forms of writing found among certain other Indian groups (Walker 1984:42-52, Zaharlick 1982:44).

Who should take responsibility for a Cherokee language program is less clear-cut. Legally, 'the duly constituted government of each tribe' has 'the authority to make all decisions on all matters that affect the interests of the tribal aggregate,' including language issues (Leap 1982:21). However, until recently Cherokee Nation has felt little urgency about taking any specific stand on language issues, due both to history and to the contemporary makeup of the Council. English, not Cherokee, has been the official language of the Cherokee Nation since the 1820's, and few of the political leaders have been fluent in Cherokee since that time. Cherokee has survived among the people, not the leaders (R. Strickland, p.c.).

So, for the present, the people have taken it upon themselves to be concerned with language issues, and are developing projects that involve children, parents, communities and schools. This is as it should be pedagogically, for children's success in school is frequently a reflection of preparation and attitudes at home. Stubbs (1980:99) has found that:

> young children will have particular difficulty in learning to read if they grow up in a home or cultural background with no tradition of literacy and hence no appreciation of the purposes of written language.

In another study, DeStefano (1984:164) had three young subjects who corroborated Stubbs' finding:

> The three boys all expressed the opinion that a child would do better in first grade if s/he already know (sic) how to read when s/he came to school.

Another delicate but crucial issue is how to best combine the twin goals many Cherokees have of success in English coupled with pride in being Cherokee. There are real problems involved in trying to function successfully as part of two different cultures. Oftentimes, acceptance by the dominant culture is interpreted as rejection of home culture or can result in rejection by the home culture. Trying to maintain one's home ties can result in lack of credence with dominant society people. Then there is the emotional drain that can result from trying to switch back and forth as the occasion demands (McLaughlin 1978:3).

The situation poses a real dilemma for parents and teachers alike: How do you best enable Cherokee children to adapt in a dominant society academic setting and prepare them for the option of life later on in the world

beyond, while at the same time helping children who have little knowledge of Cherokee and their own culture but want very much to learn more in order to develop self-esteem and a sense of identity?

Efforts

In the earlier part of this century, most whites assumed that Cherokee had died out altogether. There was so little real interaction that few facts at all were available (O. Werner, p.c.). Then the University of Chicago Carnegie Cross-Cultural Education Project was organized. Its director wanted to 'determine whether it is possible to devise more efficient means of teaching reading-writing to peoples in underdeveloped areas;' Indians were selected because supposedly they constituted 'both a prime, and a difficult, set of subjects for this experiment' (Tax 1963:1). Cherokees were selected to study because 'In 1870, when the Cherokee were an independent people and ran their own school system, they (the Cherokee speakers) were a better educated people than the surrounding whites and better educated than they are today;' however, 'Cherokees withdrew from white institutions because' in the view of one of the project organizers 'they saw themselves being threatened with social death and thus defined education and English in this light' (Thomas 1963:4).

In the course of its investigation, the study found that 'Nearly every publication on the Cherokees has predicted that their language was dying out; yet Cherokee is still indisputably the language with which Cherokees communicate.' The same report summed up the linguistic situation as follows: 1) Cherokees feel that to be Cherokee is to speak Cherokee; 2) Whites disapprove of speaking Cherokee; 3) There is concern about Cherokee remaining strong; and 4) Cherokee settlements must have a common language to function well (Wahrhaftig 1965:10,22-24). Overall, the study concluded that problems were largely due to self-imposed social isolation.

More recently, the Cherokee National Tribal Council passed their own resolution, 'Calling for the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma to Approve the Establishment of a Cherokee Language Project' (CNO Resolution No. 15-84). By this action they enabled Durbin Feeling, a gifted bilingual Cherokee on their administrative staff, to begin establishing 'a base of operations' for Cherokee language projects. The language planning goals are two-fold: All Cherokees should be proficient in English and all should be able to speak and write Cherokee. Summer Institutes in Cherokee Literacy have been held for fluent adults interested in reviving this skill in their home

communities. Long-range plans include computer generation of local new literature in Cherokee as the funding and manpower become available.

In 1991 Cherokee Nation authorized a new Language and Culture Program to produce modules to be used throughout public schools in the 14-county area that comprises Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.[5] Other Oklahoma tribes are eagerly awaiting the results, while considering their own potential language and culture programs. Additionally, for older learners, courses in spoken Cherokee and in the syllabary are available through the local university.

From this survey of projects and attitudes, it has become apparent to me that no program can succeed unless it takes into account and meets the felt needs of the community in addition to meeting the needs of the individual learner. Another insight derives from the tremendous difficulties inherent in dealing with the government in order to receive federal funds. Overall, it seems that community generated and sponsored efforts stand the best chance of success for language maintenance or renewal.

In trying to find out what types of options regarding language are facing Cherokee people, I was deeply impressed by the needs of the children and by the limited resources. It was amazing to see how political differences and divergent opinions have come to play so influential a role in language policy and choice among a people who traditionally governed themselves by consensus. I was also impressed by the relative lack of references available. American Indian languages are usually ignored or perhaps lightly glossed over in studies on bilingualism, analyses of language programs, educational surveys and the like.[6]

Conclusion

Cherokee people, like other 'persistent' peoples of the world, still have a strong sense of identity and a societal structure that perpetuates community values, whether outsiders are aware of this or not (Walker 1981b:86). It seems that at a time of conflicting views and competing needs, the historically resourceful and adaptable Cherokee people are going about the task of language maintenance in their own way.

There are several programs in operation designed to meet perceived needs, and it seems likely that Cherokee in both its spoken and written forms will continue for some time. However, the inroads of television and other pressures of being surrounded by the dominant society are

taking their toll, as are intertribal marriage, Anglo-controlled educational settings and the frequent need to make a living outside the home community.

Cherokees care very much about their language, but they have diverse opinions as to what can and should be done about it. They also care, and rightly so, about how their resources should be involved in any language program. The conviction is growing that the solutions must and will come from Indian people themselves.

NOTES

1 Information gathered from interviews conducted during the author's dissertation fieldwork, 1984-1992, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

2 Cherokee is a North American Indian language still spoken by some 11,000 people in Oklahoma, where the Cherokee people were forced to relocate in the 1830's, and by perhaps 1,100 more people in North Carolina, which was part of their ancestral home. There are at least six dialects in use today (D.H. King and J. Manus, personal communications). According to Cherokee Nation records, there are over 100,000 Cherokee Indians worldwide.

3 For a discussion of Native American Language Centers which would fulfill this need for trained, language-competent personnel, see Hale 1992:23-28.

4 The major benefits and provisions of this law are presented in Hale 1992:15-16.

5 The author was privileged to assist in this effort by gathering sociolinguistic information for the tribal language experts charged with responsibility for implementing the new program. This data, along with results from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma during the period 1984-1992, will be reported in the author's forthcoming dissertation from Northwestern University.

6 Krauss describes how political favoritism greatly infuences the treatment of languages (Hale 1992:4-5).

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